

Ni-Vanuatu in Australia and New Zealand's Labour Mobility Schemes: An Examination of Provinces

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In July 2018 the Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA), in collaboration with the Vanuatu Department of Labour and Employment Services (ESU), undertook a demographic study of ni-Vanuatu workers in Australia's Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme (RSE). The rationale for the exercise was to determine which provinces, islands and villages are gaining access to these programs. The information collected will be used to determine future research on the impacts of labour mobility in Vanuatu. Our database sample contains information on workers' age, gender, marital status, education, their agents or employers, the type of job, whether they are returnees, and other personal information, which will be the source for future publications. This type of data collection has the potential to assist future decisions on labour mobility policy and development outcome assessments. We recommend other Pacific Island states consider undertaking such demographic research.

Of all participating countries, Vanuatu has the largest number of workers in Australia and New Zealand combined with an estimated 7000 participants in RSE and SWP during the data collection period (June 2017 to June 2018). The data collected was limited in scope due to reliance on agents sending information to the ESU and working with a new database system that had only just been established.¹ As a result, there were only 2992 workers on the database who had travelled to Australia and New Zealand between June 2017 and June 2018. In drawing conclusions, it should therefore be borne in mind that less than half the total numbers of workers in both RSE and SWP are reflected in the results of the study. However, the results remain useful for both DPA and the ESU.

For DPA, such demographic analysis can assist in the determination of future research such as examining social and economic impacts of these schemes within the country, especially in localised developmental impacts (or lack thereof) of RSE and SWP on particular villages and islands. For the ESU, it assists in addressing policy development in international

labour mobility and recruitment practices in provinces. Furthermore it also addresses the constant accusations of unfairness and lack of opportunities to access the schemes. For example, it is often rumoured throughout Vanuatu that only family members of MPs, ESU staff and licensed seasonal workers agents living in Port Vila are selected to participate. However, this sample shows that there is a relatively even distribution throughout provinces per head of population. It also provides information for Vanuatu's new upcoming labour mobility policies and domestic practices that intend to address inequalities in access to RSE and SWP and other potential labour agreements in the future.

Because we limited our scope to workers who had provided their island of origin, the sample set dropped to 2511 workers. This set was then broken down to provincial and island figures (Table 1).²

Table 1: Provincial Statistics

Province	RSE	SWP	Total	Population 2016 Census	Pop'n %
Malampa	347	135	482	40,928	1.2
Penama	180	54	234	32,534	0.7
Sanma	298	55	353	54,184	0.6
Shefa	530	261	791	97,602	0.8
Tafea	256	166	422	37,050	1.1
Torba	208	21	229	10,161	2.2
TOTAL	1819	692	2511	272,459	0.9

An unexpected discovery from this analysis was that the largest number of workers per head of provincial population was recruited from the smallest and most distant province, Torba.

In terms of numbers of workers sent from islands, the top five in order of largest numbers are: Efate (442); Tanna (388); Santo (269); Malekula (237); and Ambrym (165).³ These

numbers are not surprising given that Tanna and Ambrym were part of the World Bank pilot project in New Zealand in 2006 (Schwass 2007). Per head of population, the top five islands sending workers are: Mere Lava 13.7% (Torba province); Tongoa 9.6% (Shefa province); Moso and Pele islands both 6.3% (Shefa province); and Moto Lava 5.5% (Torba province). With the exception of Moto Lava, these are all islands with a population of less than 1000.

Examining who in Australia and New Zealand is recruiting and employing workers from these provinces is vital in analysing the selection of workers. For example, similar to the accusations of unfair worker selection practices in Vanuatu, agents, labour hire companies and direct employers in Australia and New Zealand have also been accused of recruiting through family and community networks in particular regions of Vanuatu. Using Torba province as an example, where the majority of workers are involved in RSE, workers are employed by 20 various RSE employers and spread evenly. However, there are six employers for whom residents from Torba make up the majority of the ni-Vanuatu workforce they employed. For example 29 of the 44 workers hired by one RSE recruiter were from Torba. In relation to Torba workers in SWP, one employer recruited 43% of the workers from this province. Previous conversations with employers have also revealed that recruitment is often based on relationships developed with workers from particular communities (see Bailey 2014; Smith 2015). A discussion of this and other patterns relating to particular islands and villages is the subject of an upcoming DPA paper. It is important to note that recruiters have recently actively expanded their recruitment drives to other islands based on advice from the ESU and employers.⁴

Limitations

As mentioned earlier, there were limitations for both ESU and DPA in collecting this data, in particular the need to rely on recruitment agencies and labour hire companies to submit data to ESU. New Zealand's RSE-Strengthening Partnerships Programme and Australia's Labour Mobility Assistance Program, which both provide support for Pacific Island-sending nations, has significantly improved information collection practices and database training to private sector agents, direct recruiters and Pacific labour sending units. This was noticeable when comparing the 2017 database to 2018; the latter was more comprehensive, demonstrating that the system of data collection of migrant workers is improving. However, given the large number of workers absent from the database, the collection of data urgently needs improvement and oversight, a matter being addressed by the ESU.

Conclusion

Although the data did not capture every participating worker for the 2017–18 period, it has allowed us to recognise problems in data collection and build stronger information-sharing in the future. The data has revealed that RSE and SWP schemes are reaching rural Vanuatu and that recruitment from particular areas is associated with agent and employer preferences, although this too is receiving attention with the ESU actively promoting agents to recruit from a more diverse range of remote areas in Vanuatu. Further research is required to capture and assess the extent to which residents of the more remote villages of these provinces are gaining information about and access to labour mobility opportunities. While our analysis is still in the preliminary stages, the data has raised a number of questions and themes about recruitment which will be highlighted in upcoming publications.

Notes on authors

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Endnotes

1. We would like to thank Erick Sakou from ESU who worked hard to provide the most up-to-date information at the time.
2. Due to space limitations, island and village tables have not been included in this In Brief and will be provided in upcoming publications.
3. Again, due to space limitations, the full table and map of where workers originate has not been included here.
4. Gwen Carlot 11/3/2018. Vanuatu Operations Manager, Seasonal Solutions Cooperative, New Zealand, personal communication.

References

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